

Olney Presbyterian Church

4th Sunday after Epiphany

February 1, 2015

Meditation for Worship Preparation

Perhaps it is because there seem to be so many voices shouting these days; each claiming loudly to be speaking the truth that it seems hard to find that still small voice with which God speaks to us. Deuteronomy 18: 15-20 relates how the people so feared God that they asked for prophets to bring God's word to them. And God sent prophets, and they failed to heed them. God also pointed out that there would be prophets who spoke in the name of other gods or words that God did not command. Scripture gives us a guide for testing what the voices of our times say. The themes which dominate Scripture are grace, love, mercy, forgiveness and justice. Which voices are proclaiming these things today?

Prelude

And Can It Be, Wesley

Jerry H. Fulham

I find it hard to believe that a month has already past in 2015. It seems like just yesterday that we were celebrating Christ's coming to live among us. In Mark we have just recalled the baptism of the Lord, and yet in 18 days we will enter into the period known on the church calendar as Lent. Time passes so quickly and each day is a gift because each one is the day the Lord has made; **Let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

Welcome & Announcements (The Souper Bowl offering will be collected during the first hymn.)

When looking for words to express some part of why we have been gathered here each Sunday morning, reading the Psalm for the day often gives me the answer. Our call to worship this morning is based on Psalm 111. **Please stand as your are able** as we responsively begin our worship with the thoughts of the Psalmist:

*Call to Worship

Based on Psalm 111

Praise the Lord! Come give heartfelt thanks to the Lord.

Great are the works of the Lord.

The Lord is full of honor and majesty.

God's righteousness endures forever.

The Lord is gracious and merciful.

For God's faithfulness and the redemption offered

Let us worship our Lord.

Our opening hymn's lyrics are full of expressions of praise for God—but I think my favorite expression to remember is verse 3: To all, life thou givest, to both great and small, in all life thou livest the true life of all. We truly are blessed that the God who gives us life loves us enough to come and dwell among and in us: Hymn #6 in the Christian Praise Hymnal, "*Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise.*"

*Opening hymn *Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise* #6, CPH

Each and every day we have reason to give thanks and praise God. Each and every day no matter our intentions we fail in some way to achieve the obedience which should be our response to God's gifts and love. The One who pardons, heals and strengthens all who repent calls us to name our failings and our hopes. Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and one another.

*Prayer of Confession

Holy and all-powerful God, we confess that we are unable to do your will. We protect what is familiar and reject what is unknown. We admire those with courage but excuse ourselves when we falter from the truth. You command us to tell of your mighty deeds, yet we remain silent. You call us to act faithfully, yet we are slow to respond. We forget that you are always with us, and that with you all things are possible. Forgive us, lead us, make us new. Remove our desire to heed false prophets and show us your way; in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God who created us all. Amen.

*Assurance of Pardon

The God who made each of us and knows our every thought hears us now and forgives us of all our sin. We are redeemed through Jesus Christ, God's beloved Son, our Savior, who is both Alpha and Omega, all in all.

*Hymn of Response *Hear Our Prayer, O Lord* # 658, CPH

**Hear our prayer, O Lord. Hear our prayer, O Lord.
Incline Thine ear to us, And grant us Thy peace.**

Please be seated.

Our first reading this morning is from the first letter we have that Paul wrote back to the church in Corinth. Corinth was a large and bustling city through which much of the trade of the day

passed. It was largely pagan and definitely multicultural. Listen to Paul's message to those believers surrounded by these influences.

First Reading

1 Corinthians 8: 1-13

P. 1780, Pew Bible

Anthem

This Is My Father's Word, Babcock
(#43, CPH)

Choir

Our gospel reading begins with Jesus with his four newly called disciples going into the village of Capernaum. The ruins of this village which was located near the shore of the Sea of Galilee was probably the home of these fishermen whom Jesus had just called. As devout Jews, when Sabbath came, they went into the synagogue there. Mark's account of this encounter is very brief only a paragraph, but listen for the message found there for us today.

Gospel Lesson

Mark 1: 21-28

P. 1552, Pew Bible

The Word of God for the people of God

Thanks be to God!

Prayer of Illumination

Holy Spirit, we long to truly be your people. Bring to our yearning hearts and minds the truth of your Word that the words which are proclaimed today may be your Word in truth. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

Sermon

Authority and Being Right

Elizabeth Sigmon

When the people asked God to provide them prophets because they feared the divine voice, God responded but also gave them a warning that there would not only be those sent with God's message, but others as well. Our affirmation of faith this morning is a commitment to seek out only the voice of God and to try to attend to that voice in all that we say and do.

Please stand if you are able as we affirm our faith using the affirmation printed in the bulletin.

*Affirmation of Faith

from A Brief Statement of Faith, lines 1-6; 72-79

In life and in death we belong to God. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve. In gratitude to God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!" With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Please be seated.

With believers in every time and place we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. What a comforting statement. It is a call to praise and thanksgiving because we know God loves us. It is an assurance that all those things in our life which beset us cannot keep us from our Lord. With these thoughts, let us go to the Lord in gratitude and trust. Let us pray.

Prayers of Intercession & The Lord's Prayer

Almighty God, who commands the universe and all that is made, your Word is the power which makes whole what is broken, the force of good and the food of peace. We come to you in gratitude with praise and thanksgiving for all the blessings you bestow. But we still live in this broken world where glimpses of your realm are often hard to find. We come seeking comfort and healing for that brokenness. We pray for the church universal. We pray for the healing of congregations that are in turmoil, for the healing of divisions between the followers of Christ so that the Word proclaimed is heard. We lift up the leaders of nations. We pray for those who have great wealth, who have too much power, who have destructive weapons available and for those who have none. We ask that they be given the wisdom to seek your guidance so that your kingdom may come closer. Instill in them a sense of humility and grant them perspective to understand that power is not justice and order is not always well-being for all. We also bring

to you our concerns for our community where poverty and despair exist. We pray for those who go hungry and may not have shelter. We pray for those whose situations subject them to abuse and violence. We ask that you provide comfort and strength to them. We pray that you will give us the wisdom and the commitment to act in your service in ways that provide hope and strength to those in need. We pray for all those in pain and in need of care, especially those whom we have named this morning. Into your hands we commend all those for whom we pray and those who it would be easy to forget. We ask your blessing on all your people as we remember how our Lord Jesus Christ taught us to pray saying, Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen

An important way to give thanks to God for the bounty we receive is to share it with others. We can never do or give enough to earn God's generosity but we can express our gratitude by sharing our gifts.

Offering

Offertory	<i>He Touched Me</i> , arr. Jerry H. Fulham	Jerry H. Fulham
*Doxology	"Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow"	#253, CPH
*Prayer of Dedication		

Gracious Lord, as the body of Christ we seek to be a healing force in our world. Through our gifts we keep ourselves focused on who you are and what you expect of us. Let these gifts be used for good wherever there is need, and let us be used in your service to this broken world. These things we ask in the name of our Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Our closing hymn is a request of God that we may be given the eyes to see with the light of Christ, the wisdom to act in that light, keeping our focus on the one who came to redeem not only us but the world. *Be Thou My Vision*, #60 in the Christian Praise Hymnal.

*Closing hymn	<i>Be Thou My Vision</i>	#60, CPH
*Charge and Blessing		

Jesus comes to us, offering healing and hope, speaking and acting with authority. Listen to him. Go into this world, confident in God's love and healing power.

Go in peace with the knowledge that the Triune God accompanies you and will provide strength and wisdom for your witness to the world. Go in peace with God's love and peace which is always with you.

Postlude

His Name Lives On, Horn

Jerry H. Fulham

Authority and Being Right

Just a note about how I go about discerning the message which I attempt to bring each Sunday morning. I begin with reading all the lectionary selections. Usually one will strike a note as being a message that it seems I should bring. Sometimes, the opposite happens. Sometimes for various reasons a particular passage will just be unappealing to me. I can't think of a better way to put it; what that particular passage seems to say is not something at first glance that I wish to explore further. I have a friend who says that his key to picking a passage is to go to the one he least wants to preach on. This week, for me, the gospel passage from Mark fell into that category. Whatever the case, I pull commentaries on every one and read what others have found in each of the passages as I study them. Usually by Wednesday I have an idea of what the message will be. I can then come up with a title for the sermon. Sometimes as I continue to study, that title may become less relevant to the message than I initially thought. This week however, my attention was caught by a comment made by Rev. David Lose of the Luther Seminary. He often has candid and insightful comments about this endeavor we call preaching. His comments in an online blog called the Craft of Preaching were about today's passage from Mark. They went like this: "Dear Working Preacher, tell me the truth: don't you just dread exorcism stories? I mean, if there's one kind of biblical story we have a hard time relating to, it's got to be this one. Miracle stories are hard enough in our post-Enlightenment, scientific age, but at least we have experiences with longing for healing or a desire to feed those who are hungry; but demon-possession? This is simply beyond the experience and imagination of most of us. Or, if we have any imagination or thoughts about exorcism, it's been unhelpfully shaped by Rosemary's Baby and Linda Blair." It's not often that I read something that sums up my feelings so concisely. I had really planned on scanning the Mark commentaries and then focusing on either Deuteronomy or First Corinthians. If you read the meditation for preparation for worship this morning you can probably see where my thoughts on that passage were going early in the week. Later in the week it also occurred to me that this passage contains another view of why we sometimes feel that God is distant. The people God chose out of fear when they heard the divine voice requested that the Lord speak to them through prophets. And God obliged them by sending prophets to deliver the messages they needed to hear. As often as I have prayed over issues wishing that God's voice was clearer to me, perhaps to some extent I too am fearful of truly hearing what the Lord would say to me directly. In thinking about the Corinthians passage, I have also been thinking about a book which I saw whose title was "You don't have to be wrong for me to be right" by Brad Hirshfield. That seems to be an issue which we have today when it seems that our society demands uniformity instead of the unity which Paul urged for the one body of Christ. In First Corinthians Paul was addressing the behavior of some of the believers. Although their behavior was based on a correct understanding of the gospel message, their actions based on it were creating problems within the congregation. So although they were right, because of the effect their behaviors had on others, they weren't correct. There are many layers of understanding; some being more complete than others. We often assume that ours is correct and therefore the only one that matters. Paul's concern for how his actions, although right, might be detrimental to others gives us have much to ponder about how we interact with others. There were a lot of things to consider in this week's

scripture selections. Yet through all these musings, I kept coming back to the question of just what do we understand about Jesus from that exorcism account found in the first chapter of Mark. It opens as Jesus after calling the first disciples goes into the village of Capernaum. We don't know what day that was, but the next thing we are told is that when the Sabbath came, Jesus went to the synagogue as any faithful worshiper of Yahweh would do. Upon entering he begins teaching as we are told as one with authority. This manner of teaching astounded those who heard him as it was so different from the way the scribes taught. When you consider Mark's placement of the story, it is the first action of Jesus after calling four disciples. This must mean that Mark found something important in this encounter. So we need to pay attention to the details of this meeting as Mark describes it. The first detail is that his manner of teaching astounded those who heard him. They recognized that his teaching was with authority—or as another way the Greek can be translated—he spoke with power. The scribes taught religious law--the teachings handed down. Jesus taught with authority, not consulting the law. Mark does not give us any of these teachings. It was not the teaching itself which seemed important to Mark, but the manner of the teaching. So we have our first contrast showing how Jesus was different from the religious leaders of his time. The next thing we are told in this account is that within the synagogue there was a man who had an unclean spirit. Various translations for this often indicate that the man was possessed by something evil—a demon. But the text itself does not make that judgment, only that the Spirit was unclean or impure—something that did not belong within the man. And the unclean spirit recognizes Jesus, questioning what Jesus will do while naming him the Holy One of God. The unclean spirit fears that Jesus will destroy it. So in these four verses we see Mark's understanding of the mission and character of Jesus which will be more fully developed later. The most obvious thing is that this first public act of Jesus is a story of a confrontation. Matthew's gospel account of Jesus begins with Jesus' teachings; in John, Jesus creates abundance at a wedding feast; in Luke, he heals the ill and infirm, releases the prisoners and proclaims good news to the poor. In Mark, he challenges the religious leaders and picks a fight with an unclean spirit. Of course, there is little doubt who will be the victor in this showdown with the unclean spirit. The spirit protests Jesus' very presence and Jesus casts him out with a short command: "Be silent, and come out of him." Mark makes clear that Jesus is going to challenge and oppose all the forces that keep the children of God from the abundant life that God desires for all of us. There are a couple of ways we can think about Jesus' silencing and banishing that unclean spirit. If we think about it I believe we can look around us and see signs of unclean spirits which still attempt to possess us. There are feelings of anger and fear. There can be the desire for revenge. There is greed and selfishness. There are also ills like drug addiction or substance abuse. The list goes on of the things which have a hold on us—on our time and resources—which are not the things which God desires for us. Our God is a God of the broken to whom we can turn in our struggles to become free of these things. Our church should be a fellowship of the needy where we gather in Christ's name to support each other in escaping the hold these things have on us so that we might grow closer to being what God created us to be. Mark's story is clearly about the authority that Jesus has. The people who heard him teach recognized that aspect of his teachings even before the unclean spirit challenged Jesus' presence. The unclean spirit recognized who he was. It knew that Jesus had the power to heal the one possessed. And the people were again amazed that

the unclean spirit was obedient to Jesus' command. Jesus made no appeal to a higher authority. He performed no ritual in order to cast out the unclean spirit—clearly his command was sufficient. I am sure that Mark wanted his audience to understand that. But Mark also wanted to illustrate just how Jesus used his authority—to give a teaching that was not legalistic, which placed him in opposition to the religious leaders of his time. To free a man of an unclean spirit—which restored the man to what God meant him to be. We may not see demons or unclean spirits in the world around us, but we do see the brokenness where hate, greed, selfishness contribute to that brokenness. We see people who have succumbed to drugs of one sort or another with disastrous effects on them and their loved ones. If we think about this story this way, we can see where the idea of exorcising unclean spirits may still be something we need. In this story we can see that God's promise to be with us and for us always continues in our brokenness. God continues to be at work in our lives and the world, sometimes even through us as we gather in communities that are blessed to be a blessing to others. Jesus still moves in this world to challenge legalistic understandings which do not show mercy or love. Jesus still is capable of transforming us and casting out those harmful feelings which possess and damage us. Verse 14 of this chapter in Mark reads: "Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news.'" As we journey through the gospel of Mark this year, you will notice that there is a sense of urgency in the story he gives us. The word immediately is found so frequently that if you hear it in a passage even without knowing the source you can probably correctly attribute it to Mark. Jesus has been baptized, tempted in the wilderness and now comes to proclaim and demonstrate the kingdom of God on earth. He does this in Mark, by opposing those things which keep us from all that God intends for us. In Deuteronomy, people requested God to put a prophet between them and his voice. God did so, but when the people did not heed them and could no longer hear the divine voice, God descended to live among us and show us what we should be. In Jesus, God demonstrated the basis for relationships which made the legalistic view of the law unacceptable as Paul tells the Corinthians. It is not just being right that matters, if it causes harm. Each of our passages this morning has a message for today's world. God seeks to come close and mend our brokenness, even those things which possess us. Through the life and work of Jesus God's kingdom can be found even within this world and we can be transformed. Thanks be to God.